



Stuck in a Ruck: The Perpetual Crisis of Kenya Sevens' Rugby

By Carey Baraka



On March 12th 2018, Kenya, coached by Innocent Simiyu, trailed USA, led by former Kenya 7s coach, Mike Friday, by 12-19 with 1:46 left in the semi-finals of the Vancouver leg of the HSBC Sevens Circuit. The winner of this match would meet Fiji in the final of the Vancouver Sevens.

Two converted tries by American speedster Perry Baker had given the US a 14-0 lead that was halved by Nelson Oyoo, whose dancing feet hoodwinked the American big man Danny Barrett for five points in the centre. Oyoo went over again, one and a half minutes after the half-time hooter, shrugging off the attention of American speedster 2.0 Carlin Isles and taking advantage of a wonderful interception by Kenyan superstar Collins "Collo" Injera deep in the Kenyan half, to bring the Kenyans within two points of the Americans.

The Americans regained the lead at the start of the second half after Isles, arguably the fastest man in sevens rugby, had put on the afterburners, to score a try. Straight from the restart, Kenya won the ball and moved it swiftly to Andrew Amonde, on as a substitute, who tucked it under his right arm and pumped forward. From the resultant ruck, the ball moved to Jeffrey Oluoch, for a nifty switch that opened space for Collins Injera. Collo blasted through the American defense, and appeared destined for the try zone, only for Perry Baker, to catch up with him. Nevertheless, just as Baker sealed his tackle, Collo had the presence of mind to offload the ball to Willy Ambaka and Ambaka,

with his 98th try on the circuit, dove in for a try. Sammy Oliech proceeded to convert to even the scores to 19 all.

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With 24 seconds on the clock, Oliech takes the kick off. The Americans win the restart, and pass the ball, looking for an opening in the Kenyan defense as the hooter buzzes. Danny Barrett, holding the ball, attempts to run through Oyoo, but the Kenyan brings him down. The Americans ruck. The ball pops out to Perry Baker, moves down the line to Martin Losefu and then Bevon Williams who runs into a solid tackle from the Kenyan captain Oscar Ouma. The Americans ruck. The Kenyans who had established a reputation as the best team in the breakdown on the circuit win the ruck as Collins Injera steals the ball. Losefu brings him down as he off-loads to Eden Agero who, in the face of the heavy American charge, pops it to Ouma. It is thirty-five seconds after the hooter and Ouma, holding the ball under his right arm, barrels towards the try-zone to seal the game at 24-19 securing a place for Kenya in the final of the 2018 Vancouver Sevens.

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Kenya became a core member of the IRB Sevens circuit in 2004. Unlike the national football, cricket and athletics bodies, Kenya Rugby Football Union (nowadays known as Kenya Rugby Union) did not receive support from the International Rugby Board, impeding investment in a countrywide developmental program, and relied on the school network for their players.

In Shujaa’s (The Kenya National Sevens Team) first season as a core member of the circuit, the star player was Oscar Osir who like Edward Rombo before him was a swashbuckling winger with pace to burn. Osir had developed his talent at Nairobi Secondary, and he, together with other players who had developed their talents in the school system such as Benyamin Ayimba at Maseno School, Dennis ‘Ironman’ Mwanja at Musingu High, Ted Omondi at St. Mary’s Yala, among others— led Kenya into their first season as a core team. Shujaa went through a steep learning curve on the international scene.

It was not until Ayimba’s appointment as coach in 2009 that Kenya shed off its tag as the whipping boy of the circuit. In his first season as coach, Kenya reached the semi-finals seven times out of nine and the final once. Collins Injera became the World Series top try scorer while his brother, Humphrey Kayange was nominated as IRB Sevens player of the year in 2009. The Ayimba-led team reached the semi-finals of the Sevens World Cup at the end of the season.

Ayimba’s next two seasons were not as impressive as the first, and neither was his replacement, Mitch Ocholla’s sole season in 2011-2012. Under pressure from the sponsors, Kenya Airways, and the IRB, KRU took their search for the next Shujaa coach abroad. In came English man Mike Friday. Friday was coach for only a season, but what a season it was. The team finished 5th in the standings. Willy Ambaka was voted into the season dream team, and, at the World Cup, at the end of the

season, the team replicated its performances from three years earlier, reaching the semi-finals, with only a last-gap tackle by Englishman Dan Norton preventing Ambaka from netting a try that would have kept them in the tournament.

The next season would see the return of Benjamin Ayimba for a second time, a reign which would culminate in Kenya's first ever main cup win, at the Singapore Sevens in April 2016. However, Ayimba's glory did not last, as he found himself at loggerheads with the KRU board allegedly over a move to fight for the players' rights.

However, Friday left the team at the end of the season, in almost the exact way that Simiyu would five years later. He was controversially fired by KRU and promptly reinstated just before the 2013 World Cup in Moscow. After the World Cup, he walked away completely. A new coach, South African Paul Treu, was hired, leading Shujaa in the 2014/15 season, but he would resign abruptly citing interference by some members of the KRU board. It was during Treu's tenure that KRU reviewed player salaries leading to the senior players including Injera, Oscar Ouma, Dennis Ombachi and Billy Odhiambo, refusing to play for Kenya. Former Kenyan international Felix Ochieng, who was Treu's assistant, was promoted to head coach for the remainder of 2014/2015 season.

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On October 17th, 2016, Innocent "Namcos" Simiyu was appointed head coach of the national sevens team. His remit was to ensure that Kenya became a serious contender at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. Simiyu, a former Kenya 7s and Kenya 15s captain, took to the task with gusto, and he came up with a four-year plan. The first year was supposed to be the foundation year, to focus on the systemic concerns such as issues with player contracts and equipment that had previously affected player performances. In the second year, the team's performance was projected to rise to the challenge of securing a place in the top six teams alongside a plan to build a Kenya Sevens B-team that would be playing five tournaments per year.

By March 2018, Simiyu's plan was well and truly on course. The team was performing exceptionally on the circuit, and gaining plaudits for their wonderful displays on the turnover, in which they were by far the best team on the circuit. The improved physicality and tactical awareness of the team was due to the work put in by Simiyu and Geoffrey Kimani, the Strength and Conditioning Coach, combined with sessions with IRB referees that delved into the rule changes in the game. Furthermore, late in March 2018, the B-team, which Simiyu had been advocating for, had won the Victoria Sevens, with Brian Wahinya and Levy Amunga, who had been schoolmates in St. Mary's, Yala, scoring the tries in the final.

After a stellar performance by Shujaa in the Vancouver leg of the IRB Sevens Circuit, in March 2018, Brand Kenya approached Kenya Rugby Union to appoint the team as brand ambassadors of the country. As part of their deal with the players, Brand Kenya was to pay each of the players a one-time fee of a hundred thousand Kenya shillings, and KRU instructed the players that, rather than having each player deal directly with Brand Kenya, they would take over and make sure the payments reached each individual player. The deal was made public on May 24th, 2018, by Richard Omwela, the Kenya Rugby Union board chairman.

However, by the time the team was playing in the Paris leg of the HSBC Circuit on 9th June, no money had hit the players' personal accounts. The players, in a desperate attempt to make a point, decided to mask the 'Make it Kenya' logo on their national jerseys before their second game against Fiji in Paris. Shujaa beat the sevens heavyweights, winning 22-19, ending the Fijians' 24-match unbeaten run in the circuit. Despite the win, KRU and Brand Kenya officials were furious, and Omwela promised consequences. Several sources interviewed stated that Brand Kenya had indeed paid out the money to KRU's accounts before the Paris leg only for the money to be rerouted to take care of some pending overdrafts that KRU had. The board defended its position, stating the delay in the payment to the players had been clearly communicated through the management.

Incensed, Simiyu got embroiled in this saga, and earned the sack as a result, with his assistant, William Webster, mandated to guide the team through the World Cup, six weeks away in San Francisco, USA. Simiyu says that he had been in a meeting with the rest of the coaching staff when he received word of a disciplinary meeting constituted against the players. Simiyu went to the disciplinary meeting, requested to be heard and was told to wait outside. He obliged. According to Citizen TV, Simiyu had stormed a tribunal hearing between Brand Kenya and the Kenya Sevens team, to plead the player's case following the fiasco in Paris. While Simiyu denies storming the meeting, he does not deny his anger at the injustice of the situation. "We were six weeks to the World Cup, and KRU initiated a disciplinary process on the players without notifying me...I felt that, as head of the program, I had to be involved because I knew the issues."

Just like Ayimba before him, Simiyu's tiff with the board was due to his insistence on fighting for the players. "It was more of a kangaroo court," he says, "because the people who started the problem were the ones disciplining the players, and this did not make sense. Because the issues with regards to Brand Kenya started at the office of the CEO and the DOR (Director of Rugby), and they were solely responsible for what happened, but they are the same ones who are now disciplining the players. It was more of a cover-up so that they can sell a story to the public."

The sacking of Simiyu, and the subsequent refusal by KRU to renew his contract, is an indicator of a dangerous pattern that has emerged in Kenya Sevens in the last few years. While some would claim that it was an individual disagreement between KRU and Simiyu, it is telling that senior players such as Collins Injera, Oscar Ouma, Oscar Ayodi, and Willy Ambaka and virtually all the players who were contracted by KRU to play for Shujaa last season have refused to play Sevens rugby this season.

Kenyans on social media reacted in anger at the move to fire Simiyu. The players, too, reacted, as they swore not to play in the World Cup as long as Simiyu was not the coach. Rashid Echesa, the former Cabinet Secretary for Sports, intervened, and, after a meeting with the KRU board led by Vice-Chairman, Thomas Opiyo, Simiyu was restored to his post. However, by the time he was reinstated, it was too late for the team. Shujaa had lost four weeks of active preparation time, and it cost them in San Francisco. After two consecutive semi-final appearances at the Sevens world cup, Shujaa failed to qualify for the quarters of the 2018 World Cup, losing their last group stage match 31-26 to Scotland, after having squandered a 28-5 lead. This was to be Simiyu's last assignment as Kenya Sevens head coach. Despite leading the team to a record points tally of 104 points in the Circuit, KRU decided not to renew his contract, choosing instead to advertise the position. The four-year plan had now been abandoned.

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as Collins Injera, Oscar Ouma, Oscar Ayodi, and Willy Ambaka and virtually all the players who were contracted by KRU to play for Shujaa last season have refused to play Sevens rugby this season. That Geoffrey Kimani also turned down the contract he was offered by KRU and instead took up an appointment as Uganda's Strength and Conditioning coach points to deeper-lying issues within KRU.

According to Simiyu, the problems in Kenyan rugby are obvious, and one does not need a rocket science degree to point them out. First, he feels that there is a lack of proper governance within Kenyan rugby. The leadership is irrational, has issues with their integrity, and the people at the top have bought their way into the leadership of the game. Furthermore, Simiyu argues that several of the clubs are briefcase clubs (either owned by a company, or run by a few individuals, and, sometimes, just one individual), and the people use their clubs to advance their personal ambitions. "It will be more about sharing resources. That's what happened with Kenya Sevens. They used the national team as a kitty to share, to secure votes, so that they can get elected."

This is what had happened in 2014, when the KRU Chairman, Mwangi Muthee, together with KRU directors Godwin Kiruga and Maurice Masiga, quit in a huff (Peninah Wahome, the KRU Director of Development, would soon follow). In his [resignation letter](#), Muthee talked about "serious questions raised by sponsors about some board members' involvement in issues of conflict of interests in the supplying of kit to the KRU and the fraternity, questionable procurement of airline tickets worth tens of millions of shillings outside established KRU channels, questionable hotel accommodation contracts, and many other inflated bills and cases of unbecoming language to downright insulting language directed at senior management of some of our sponsors." Muthee's piledriver hit hard, and the national government promised to clear "the rugby mess."

Simiyu feels that some of the people on KRU the board, are out to deliberately sabotage Kenya Sevens. "We had put up a plan how we approach the game, even in terms of pre-season, conditioning aspect, health aspect, the management and administration...by the time we were going to the World Cup, all those things were being removed. By the time our contracts were ending, it was not clear whether there would be a pre-season. There was no point basically to apply."

Ayimba is equally blunt in his assessment of KRU. In his view, "they know where they want us to be, they don't have a plan, neither to do they support anybody who's got a radical idea...Right now we just have people who are happy to be in office and to be called KRU directors, as opposed to people who want to make a difference."

On January 16th, 2019, the Kenya 7s team to the Hamilton and Sydney legs of the 2018-2019 HSBC World Sevens Series did not include any of the players who had represented Kenya at the 7s World Cup six months earlier. The players who had travelled to the World Cup had been expected to form the core of the 2018-2019 team which would challenge for Top Four status, in line with the four-year plan that had been agreed with Innocent Simiyu when he was appointed Head Coach of Kenya Sevens in 2016. That none of the senior players was named in the team for these two legs, and that the team accumulated a grand total of four points from these two legs is a sign of how quickly things have unraveled for Kenya Sevens and at the Kenya Rugby Union. This unraveling is part of an existing pattern, rather than a new event.

The Jacob Ojee-captained side was led by Paul Murunga Amunavi, the immediate former Homeboyz RFC coach, who had been appointed Simiyu's successor. Murunga was appointed coach on the back of Homeboyz' dominant performance in the local sevens circuit, having won four of the six tournaments, and finished second and third in the other two. In an [interview](#) with the Daily Nation, Murunga claimed that the aim was "to a build a strong side next season that will reach the medal bracket at the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games and go on to win the World Cup in 2021." Speaking separately, Thomas Odundo, the Director of Rugby at KRU, offers thoughts which do not tally with

Murunga's assessment. He says, "I can't say I can tell you what will be there in two years' time. For instance, one, we don't know how the World Series is going to end, I don't know. It might go either way, we might fail to remain in the World Series".

On February 2nd, 2019, ten months after the win over the USA in Vancouver, the Kenyans faced the Americans again. The Kenyans had faced USA after Vancouver, drawing 19-19 in the London leg of the circuit. Just over half a year later, the team is no longer the same. Gone are Willy Ambaka, Collins Injera and Nelson Oyoo, the try-getters in the last two USA-Kenya matchups. Gone too are Oscar Ouma, who was in the dream team last season, Sammy Oliech, Andrew Amonde, Billy 'The Kid' Odhiambo, Dan Sikuta. Agero, Ayodi, the captain, Jeffrey Oluoch and Brian Tanga. In short, the team that was supposed to compete for the gold in Tokyo in 2020. In their place, instead, are a bunch of players who are, while talented, simply not ready to be playing at the top level. They are, in the words of Odundo, "players who had never played at that level. They were seeing people they see only on TV." This new team was pummeled by the US, going down 41-0. What this means is that while the US and Kenya were at the same level last season, this season USA is top of the standings, while Kenya is firmly in the relegation battle.

According to the Kenya Rugby Union, lack of money is to blame for most of the challenges facing Kenya 7s, and Kenyan rugby in general. Odundo says, "We had to revise our terms of engagement, based on whatever money was available to us. The Sevens team doesn't have a sponsor at the moment, so we don't really have the funds to support the pay they were being given when Sports pesa was there." On January 1st, 2018, a government tax of 35% took effect. The next day, Ronald Karauri, the Sports pesa CEO, announced the government tax meant that the betting firm could no longer continue supporting sports, and so it was cancelling all its sponsorship arrangements with Kenyan sports teams.

KRU was one of these, and it lost its main financial partner. Four months later, when Sports pesa renewed its sponsorship deals with Gor Mahia, AFC Leopards, and FKF, KRU was left out in the cold. Despite this, Odundo points out, "For all of last year, KRU met all its obligations to the players, despite having no sponsors. But this year we simply had to review that." Furthermore, all their attempts to get new sponsors have been moot. "It is ongoing, we are always having conversations with sponsors, but we haven't had any positive response." But, in the meantime, "...plans change...we've got to adjust. There's always adjustments going on."

While money is definitely an issue, focusing solely on it absolves KRU of all responsibility for the failures with Kenya Sevens. Critics have argued that it is KRU's job to get money for the team, and their inability to do so is an indictment of their failure as a body. A general rule with sevens rugby, and with other sports, is that sponsors are attracted to a team that is performing well. Reflecting on this, Ayimba asks, "So, if you get rid of the people who are performing well, what is the end game?" In addition, KRU is heavily in-debt, with indications of debts of up to [100 million](#).

Sasha Mutai, a former KRU vice-chairman who vied for the chairmanship at the concluded March 20th KRU elections, points out that KRU dug this pit for themselves. The fact that Safari Sevens, which used to be the flagship sporting event in the country, having made losses for five years straight, thus making 2013 the last time the event was profitable. This, coupled with the fact that a KRU director was verbally [abusive](#) to Safaricom's head of marketing, led to the communication behemoth pulling out of sponsoring the tournament, and KRU.

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guided Kenya to its first ever Cup win in Singapore in 2016 and Mike Friday, who took Kenya to the World Cup semis, and who is currently lighting up the circuit with USA 7s.

Subsequently, corporate Kenya lost its faith with Kenya Rugby Union. Mutai argues that under the tutelage of the Omwela led board, the game has lost credibility completely, and only with a fresh start will the sponsors come back to sponsoring the Sevens team. That the national government, while promising to assist KRU, [insisted](#) that it would only do so after the elections, (perhaps waiting to see who will be elected), is a microcosm of the lack of trust that stakeholders in the game have in the KRU board and this includes Corporate Kenya, the players, the coaching staff, fans, both pitch side and online.

Innocent Simiyu, the most successful coach in the history of Kenya Sevens by virtue of points tally at the end of the season, left his role acrimoniously. So did Ayimba, who guided Kenya to its first ever Cup win in Singapore in 2016 and Mike Friday, who took Kenya to the World Cup semis, and who is currently lighting up the circuit with USA 7s. In the first six legs of the new season, Kenya Sevens has not qualified for any of the quarter-finals. There is a feeling in sections of the local rugby circle that current coach Paul Murunga is being set up to fail and that he will be fired and a new coach will be hired by KRU, probably a foreigner.

Simiyu smiles with bitterness at this prospect. "I don't think it's rocket science. You don't need a foreigner to tell you. The challenges are always there. Ayimba said it, he was fired. Friday said it, he was fired. Paul Treu said it, he was fired. I've said the same thing, I was fired...It's the same rat race. So long as they can't deal with the issues, they attack the people."

Meanwhile, KRU has shifted its expectations with the realization that this season is bust, with the conditions it has dug Kenya 7s into. While the previous plan was that, Kenya would be fighting to win several legs, this season, Odundo, the Director of Rugby at the KRU is not optimistic "We hope to get to some quarter-finals, and maybe a semi-final, which is achievable." In addition, Odundo, the man responsible for matters rugby at the Kenya Rugby Union, points out, "I don't know what failure is. Maybe our expectations of ourselves are too high."

On 20th March 2019, Oduor Gangla was elected chairman of KRU. Alongside Gangla the former KRU secretary, most of the KRU directors retained their seats. In 2016, when they had been voted into office, Gangla and this crop of directors had declared themselves 'Team Change', but now having seen the state of Kenyan rugby during their reign, rugby observers are pessimistic about whether the next three years will be any different from the previous three.

On March 4th 2019, USA won the Las Vegas 7s. With the win, which was coincidentally the fifth consecutive time they were making a main cup final, the team rose to the top of the standings. It is not possible to look at USA's performances without a tinge of regret, knowing that this was the level which Kenya would very well have been at had Simiyu been allowed to proceed with his plan. While the USA, a team that was at the same level as Kenya less than a year earlier tops the standings with 113 points, Kenya has a measly 18 points, which, while should ostensibly mean that the team is safe from relegation, is a sign of how low, and how fast, the Kenya Rugby Union let the team fall.

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